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ABSTRACT

A study examined and analyzed the functions of written language for one writer during her first-grade year. Data included 516 pieces of writing done by the subject, transcriptions of interviews with the subject, and field notes. Results indicated that: (1) sources of the subject's writing ranged from extremely structured situations to "creative writing time"; (2) regular writing activities included phonics worksheets, books and stories, and formal handwriting; (3) infrequent writing activities included lists, captions, and journal writing; (4) nonlanguage functions of writing involved the subject's desire to be seen by the teachers as a good student and a good worker; (5) written language activity was also used to maintain order and quiet; and (6) written language activity also assumed an economic function in the classroom--certain writing activities had to be completed before students were allowed to work at centers, read silently, or write about things they chose. Findings suggest that: teachers need to look at the function of each writer's engagement in written language activity to understand if the writer is writing the way "real" writers write; a writer's agenda is inextricably linked to ownership; and teachers may see richer, more authentic, and more powerful student writing if teachers allow writers to write from their own agendas rather than from the teacher's agenda. (Three tables of data are included; contains 19 references.) (RS)

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Functions of Written Language in a First Grade Classroom

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Functions of Written Language in a First Grade Classroom

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
begins to live
That day.
(Emily Dickinson)

Emily Dickinson's words may be extended to written language, especially if we believe that words take on life as they are written. Writing effects the writer's life as writing and thinking impact each other mutually (Applebee, 1984). We are coming to understand that young writers are aware of the power of written language long before entering school (Clay, 1987; Meyer, 1992). Once young writers enter school, they may or may not be in a setting which supports and elaborates upon the many functions of written language.

In this paper, I will examine and analyze the functions of written language for one writer, Zoe, during the year in which she is in first grade. The work reported here is part of a larger, two year study of a young writer during her kindergarten and first grade years (Meyer, 1992). In that study, I compared written language at home and at school over the course of the two years. Because of our growing need to understand the effect of classroom literacy activity upon what children learn, the focus of this paper is the functions of written language at school in first grade.

Functions Of Language

Children, indeed all users of language, are constantly learning language, learning through language, and learning about language (Halliday, 1988). This three faceted view of language (learning, learning through, and learning about) is a common thread which permeates much of what we understand about the functions of language. Written language is a vehicle for conveying meaning. Writers rely upon the words they write; they rely upon the language-based functions of writing.

Within one genre of writing, we may find a broad range of functions. Fifteen different functions for written language in journals alone are reported by Staton, Shuy, and Kreeft (1982). Journal writers: report opinions, report personal facts, report general facts, respond to questions, predict, complain, give directives, apologize, thank, evaluate, offer, promise, ask informational questions, ask procedural questions, and ask opinion questions.

Sulzby and Teale (1991) discuss domains of language activity in which writers and readers are involved: daily living activities, entertainment, school-related activities, work, religion, interpersonal activity, communication, information networks, storybook time, and the use of literacy to teach and learn literacy. The use of literacy to teach and learn literacy is particularly relevant to the study presented in this paper. Specifically in question in this study is the nature of the relationship between those involved in literacy teaching and learning, the nature of the substance of the activity, and the impact each has upon a young

writer's growing understanding of the functions of written language specific to the school setting. This returns to the common thread of learning language, learning through language, and learning about language (Halliday, 1975).

When Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied inner-city families, they found a wealth of written language functions. Writing was used: as a substitute for oral messages, for social-interactional purposes, as a memory aid, in financial situations, for public records, in an expository way, instrumentally, autobiographically, recreationally, creatively, educationally in course work, for work-related activity, and in the environment. Using written language to express meaning is woven through the lives of individuals within a literate culture.

Frank Smith (1983) applies Halliday's (1975) functions of oral language to written language activity. Smith suggests that written language may be: instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative, and/or representational. I use 'and/or' because many times written language functions overlap. Smith adds functions which Halliday does not include: diversionary, authoritative/contractual, and perpetuating functions.

Halliday's (1975) description of field, tenor, and mode may also be used to explicate functions of written language. Written language activity is initiated within a field: the particular subject matter, at a particular setting, and at a given time. It reflects relationships (tenor) and occurs via a mode. The complex relationships between field, tenor, and mode frame the function (and genre) of a particular written language activity. The field, tenor,

and mode outline the nature of the activity in which learning, learning through, and learning about language occurs.

Halliday and Smith underscore the social nature of written language activity. A writer writes to make sense of, impact, effect, or reach out to her world in some way. Writing signifies a relationship. Iredell (1898) was aware of this almost a century ago.

> A letter has been received, read and discussed by several members of the family. It is then laid on the table. Harold [a three year old] takes it up. He looks it over and walks around thoughtfully with it under his arm. Presently, turning up the blank side of the sheet, he says, "I want to write." He is supplied with paper and pencil, and seated in his little chair, is much occupied for five minutes. He then takes the scrawled-over sheet to his grandmother, with the request that she read it. Does she hesitate? Not at all. She promptly reads from it such sentences as he might have given expression to, greatly to his joy and satisfaction. He is learning to write. (Iredell, 1898, p. 235)

In the family described by Iredell, the three year old child has witnessed some functions of written langauge and wants to be included.

Method

I was a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) in six year old Zoe's first grade .grade classroom at least once each week during the entire year in which she was in first grade. Initially, my role was as a passive observer, but this changed to a more moderate level (Agar, 1980) when the first grade teacher began to ask for ideas about teaching writing. Specifically, she wanted to understand more about writers workshop in the first grade classroom and asked me to demonstrate.

Over the course of the year, I collected everything which Zoe wrote in school. Since she is my daughter, I included her in the analysis of the data because she is available to me after school and she knew much about the routines and regularities of the classroom and could explain the contexts in which she wrote various pieces. We collected 516 pieces of her writing during Zoe's year in first grade. The formal monthly sessions in which she and I discussed her writing were audio tape recorded and analyzed according to Spradley (1979). I kept a journal with specific responses to questions I asked during the weeks between our formal interviews. The first grade teacher was interviewed formally and informally many times over the course of the year.

I took extensive field notes during each visit, unless I was teaching with the first grade teacher. The field notes were elaborated according to the recommendations of Bogden and Biklen (1982) immediately following each day's visit. I relied upon grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and strategies discussed by Spradley (1980) to analyze the field notes. I used 'parallel strategies' to analyze written language pieces. By 'parallel strategies' I mean that I viewed written language pieces as artifacts to be categorized and studied, paralleling qualitative processes for analyzing field notes.

Each written language piece which Zoe brought home for the entire year was coded in a variety of ways. I coded pieces reflective of the tenor of the relationship between Zoe, the teacher, and other children who might have been involved in particular pieces. John Dewey (1938) writes that ," . . . it is a unique doubtfulness which

makes that situation to be just and only the situation it is" (p. 105). It was my goal to understand and explain the "unique doubtfulness" of the functions of Zoe's written language activity in school.

Writing in the First Grade Classroom

The first grade teacher, Ms H, was obligated to use the newly adopted basal reader. The new reading program included a writing program which was correlated to the reading experiences the children were having in the basal reader. The district also adopted a writing program, a decision which confused Ms H because she felt as though she had two writing programs to cover with her class. The district writing program, outside the basal, required five steps of writing (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) which Graves (1984) finds dogmatic.

Since there were so many sources for written language activity, Zoe's writing ranged from extremely structured situations, such as worksheets prescribed by the basal, to 'creative writing time' which occurred once or twice a week for children who had finished their other assignments. The children were required to read during the first half hour of the day; sometimes Zoe (and others) chose to quietly write instead. Ms H invited me to help her each Friday as she and the children explored writers workshop. I did not follow a prescribed pattern to arrive at having children publish. I presented minilessons on a variety of topics, read a book to the class, and had them write about what interested them.

The writing activity which took place over the course of the year is summarized in Tables 1-3. Regular writing activities are

those which took place ten or more times during the year. Infrequent writing activities are those which occurred fewer than ten but more than two times during the year. Miscellaneous writing activities are those which took place once or twice during the year in school.

Insert about here: Table 1

Insert about here: Table 2

Insert about here: Table 3

Discussion

Most of the writing activities which are presented in Tables 1-3 are self-explanatory and will not be reiterated here. The activities emerged from the prescribed curriculum and the pressures Ms H felt from the school, the district, parents, and the principal. Although Zoe did not understand the pressures upon Ms H, she was quite conscientious about her school work, reflective, no doubt, of her older sister's commitment to school and her parents' valuing of the school experience. I was a second grade teacher before becoming

a literacy researcher and Zoe's mom is a high school art teacher. Zoe did what Ms H expected of her; Zoe completed her assignments.

One way in which the functions of the many pieces Zoe completed as a first grader may be explicated is through field, tenor, and mode. The written mode, typically using a pencil on paper, was involved for most pieces. The various fields may be discerned from the variety of pieces. For example, phonics worksheets were used more than 70 times during the school year. The field of a phonics sheet is the particular phonetic element being addressed. The study of the short /a/ sound involved writing the letter **a** under pictures which had that sound, or inserting an **a**, if one belonged, in a word presented without a vowel. The field of study was the short /a/ vowel sound. Tenor is discussed below.

Nonlanguage Functions of Writing

The tenor of the relationship between Zoe and her teacher provides a window into understanding nonlanguage functions of writing in this first grade classroom. Zoe adopted the characteristics of 'good student' and 'good worker' which the teacher had explained. Zoe wanted to please her teacher. Therefore, she completed her work as neatly, quietly, and carefully as she possibly could because these three characteristics of work were valued by Ms H. This made sense because Zoe wanted to succeed in school and the teacher made the ground rules for success clear and available to all the students.

A Nonlanguage Interactional Function of Writing

One function of all written language in the classroom was interactional--reflective of the relationship which was always implied between teacher and student.

However, I do not believe that Smith (1983) or Halliday (1975) meant interactional in quite the way it occured in Zoe's first grade. They discuss the interactional function as engaging in language use with the **content** of the language, its meaning, as being the vehicle for an interaction. Yet many times the content was not as important to Zoe as was the overriding interaction with the teacher. She was engaging in written language activity to please the teacher, to maintain a relationship by pleasing the teacher with work. For example, a story such as the untitled "ten ten ten", shown below, demonstrates a piece which was acceptable to the teacher, maintained Zoe's relationship with the teacher, served to complete the requirement of filling one page with writing, but was not content-focused in doing all those things.

ten, ten, ten.
I love ten my sisiter
is ten/2 the end
the end the end
the end the end
the end the end
the end the end
the end.
(Ten, ten ten. I love ten. My sister is ten and a half.
The end . . .)

The tenor of Zoe's relationship with Ms H was rooted in Ms H's satisfaction with Zoe's writing. The interaction was not due to or based in the content or language-based meaning of the piece. Rather,

the interaction was based on physical characteristics of the piece (length, neatness, spelling, etc.).

A Nonlanguage Regulatory Function of Writing

The written language activity of the classroom was also used to maintain order and quiet. Zoe completed many of the 516 writing activities by working alone or with a small group or a partner. She did not usually write near or with the teacher. The teacher worked with individuals and small groups while the rest of the children were writing. In this sense, the written language activity of the classroom had a regulatory function. The teacher relied upon on the children's written language activity as a time slot in which she could work with individuals and small groups. The **assignment** regulated how Zoe used her time.

The regulatory function, as discussed by Smith (1983) or Halliday (1975), involves using language to regulate others. In the first grade classroom, 'regulatory' means power, control, and management **over** a writer. It does not involve (the more authentic) regulatory function of writers writing to control others through the meaning of what they write.

An Economic Function

Written language activity also assumed an economic function in the classroom. Certain written language activities needed to be completed before Zoe was allowed to work at centers, read silently, or write about things she chose. Written work was the capital with which Zoe could buy her way into writing activities that she wanted to complete. For example, Zoe was working on a Halloween story with two other children in the classroom. They all needed to have

completed their work before they could write the story collaboratively. This often put off work on the story for days because one or the other of the children had not completed their assigned written work. They did not have the 'tender', their completed work, to buy their way into story writing.

I do not mean to bash Ms H or paint a picture of a horrific classroom situation. The room was well-decorated, comfortable, had a big classroom library, and Ms H is a loving and caring teacher. The day-to-day routine of the classroom did allow for Zoe to become interested in and pursue some written language activity which was important to her (Zoe) as an emerging writer. Over the course of a few weeks, during her morning silent reading time, Zoe wrote:

ghost times by Zoe//
One day a very strnage think
happend. It was a very hot
day. And suddenly it
began to snow. Everybody
was in there bathing suit.
They got frozen. they
could see owt. It was
a ghost. The people could not move. There names were
P__,K__ and Jowe and P___//
was wearing a bikini. The people
tried to say help. But
they could not because they
were frozen. Then as quick
as the ghost came it
left. K__, P__ and Howe got un frozen and jumped
in the pool agin.
the ghost never came back.//
Now a days Jowe, P___ and K___
celebrate. They call it ghost
day. They have to have a
custom.
The end//
My name is Zoe Nellie-

Meyer. I am six years old.
My teachers name is
Mrs. S____ H___. And I go
to H___ Elementary School.
Readers comints.
[(// indicates new page) Ghost Times by Zoe One day a very strange thing happened. It was a very hot day. And suddenly it began to snow. Everybody was in their bathing suit. They got frozen. They could see out. It was a ghost. The people could not move. Their names were P____, K____, and Joey. P___ was wearing a bikini. The people tried to say help. But they could not because they were frozen. Then, as quick as the ghost came, it left. K___, P___ and Howie got unfrozen and jumped into the pool again. The ghost never came back. Nowadays, Joey, P____, and K___, celebrate. They call it ghost day. They have to have a costume. The end. My name is Zoe Nellie Meyer. I am six years old. My teacher's name is Mrs. S___ H____. And I go to H Elementary School. Readers' comments.]

But, all of the 67 stories and books that Zoe wrote in first grade did not serve the same function. Some were completed solely for economic or teacher-regulated reasons. One day, during the same month Zoe was working on "Ghost Times", the class had creative writing time. Zoe wrote the following, left untitled.

Pat and Zoe
Kim is in My hows.
So is Pat nad Rick.
Brook is at my hous to.
So is MRS.H__ she is
teching us a lasin.
Eivin is here too. I like
him he is Waring
swat pants. ring ring.
the telufon. holow
o gud I will be there.
[Pat and Zoe. Kim is in my house. So is Pat and Rick. Brooke is at my house too. So is Mrs. H. She is teaching us a lesson. Evin is here too. I like him. He is wearing sweat pants. ring ring. The telephone. Oh, good, I will be there.]

Although this story might have been worked into a book, one of the options for creative writing pieces, Zoe chose to abandon it. She said that she was not interested in finishing it. Zoe reported that the piece was written to the bottom of the page to meet the requirement that 'creative writing' pieces fill an entire side of a piece of paper without skipping lines.

The function of "Ghost Times" is imaginative (Smith, 1983) or creative (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The functions of the untitled pieces are regulatory, economic and teacher-controlled (interactional). The difference has to do with ownership. When Zoe took ownership of an assignment or a time slot during the day, the function remained rooted within her as a writer, though the writing may very well extend towards others (looking for response to her story). Perhaps it is significant that Zoe never left stories untitled when she took ownership of them.

Zoe knew when she was genuinely invested in a piece of her writing. She would talk to friends and family about it and was proud of the competed piece. She invested time, energy, and emotion into it. Many times, the process of working on a piece assumed more importance than the completed piece. She relished in the social activity which saturates authentic writing. This feeling was not limited to story writing. She wrote letters and notes in school which also had the same commitment.

Of all the pieces Zoe wrote in school, few of them showed evidence of such investment. Most pieces were completed due to teacher regulation, the writing-based economy of the classroom, and Zoe's desire to please and achieve. The economic, nonlanguage

regulatory, and nonlaguage interactional functions are nonlanguage functions of written language. Such functions have implications for classroom practice.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Teachers may not know what children are learning. That is a strong statement, but one worthy of consideration. Perhaps we are teaching children about a literacy economy which undermines what we dream about for them as writers. We need to examine the functions of written language in classrooms. This scrutinization may be possible by studying three facets of written language activity: function, agenda, and ownership.

Functions of Written Language

We need to look at the function of each writer's engagement in written language activity to understand if the writer is writing the way "real" writers write. A writer writes for meaning first and foremost and focuses on other facets of writing when they are needed to support her in making meaning. We need to support writers in their endeavors in ways which maintain the real langauge functions of written language. We know that children learn language from whole to part (Goodman, 1986); it would be more meaningful to an individual writer to learn about writing when she is engaged and invested in work she chooses to do. Through such work, she will address a broad range of what she needs as a writer.

A Writer's Agenda

A writer's agenda consists of the issues she addresses in her writing. Her agenda may not always be a list which she can articulate, but it is quite present in her written language activity.

A writer's agenda may include issues from the graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic systems of written language. Inherent in the notion of a writer's agenda is her commitment to making meaning. Issues on the agenda become more salient when the writer's goal of meaning making is obstructed by a writer-sensed lack of knowledge about some facet of written language.

It was at such times that Zoe would urgently ask, "How do you write the /ch/ sound?" or, "How do you make that thing that makes this a question?" Or, she might invent, in an instant, a spelling or a conjugation or a punctuation-- something to deal with a surface agenda item so that she could continue with a writer's most urgent and deep agenda item: making meaning. A writer's agenda is inextricably linked to ownership.

Ownership

Ownership means that the writer makes choices about what she will write. This is not new; Graves (1983) has been saying this for years. Ownership implies that writers know what they want to write about. They usually do. Ownership implies that writers have agendas for their written language activity. They usually do. If we can make the subtle shift in classrooms, the shift to allowing writers to write from their own agendas rather than from the teacher's agenda, we may see richer, more authentic, and more powerful writing activity. This does not mean that teachers can never make suggestions or teach. It means that teachers invite and offer opportunities; we support and help writers elaborate their agendas. It also means that teachers regain faith in writers as

individuals who will learn, learn through, and learn about written language.

As teachers of writing, we are confronting a tension between function, agenda, and ownership. Zoe has shown that she learns the most about language when she can safely pursue her own agenda and explore the functions of written language. She will do so with great zest when she owns her work. This implies respect for the writer, rather than worrying about criteria for written language development which were established far from the child. We owe it to our children to use classroom time as impactfully as possible. They need to be spending their time writing the important 'stuff' of who they are and what interests them and involved in real language functions of writing. Alvina Burrows knew this thirty years ago.

> How great is our bounty? An inheritance of millions! Not of dollars but of opportunities. Millions of children, millions of moments when their human need of communication quickens to life the sparks of creativity! For the future nothing is more important that these sparks, whether only aglow or already incandescent, should light the way to new freedom and new awareness. The test of education in a democracy may well be the degree to which individuals learn to trust their soul's invincible surmise and thus . . . discover new continents, not of lands but of ideas and of ethics; new dreams by which to fashion themselves anew in music and dance and electricity; in clay and chemicals and wood; and in the enduring majesty of written words . . . (Alvina Burrows, 1955, p. 7)

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Table 1

Regular Writing Activities for Zoe in the First Grade

Type of Writing	Frequency
Phonics Worksheets	72
Books and Stories	67
Formal Handwriting (letter formation practice)	50
Basal Comprehension Worksheets	43
Basal Vocabulary Worksheets	36
Spelling words into sentences	36
Spelling tests	29
Rendering (copying identically what is on board)	25
Spelling practice booklets	24
Homework	23
Basal: journal-like	10
Basal: mechanics/punctuation	10

Table 2

Infrequent (fewer than ten, more than two) Writing Activities for Zoe in the First Grade

Type of Writing	Frequency
"Supplemental" basal sheets	8
Signs	7
Basal structural analysis	6
Bubbles (dialogue)	5
Daily oral language	5
Journal	5
Notes	5
Captions	4
Lists	4

Table 3

Miscellaneous Writing Activities for Zoe in the First Grade

Type of Writing	Frequency
Labelling	2
Letters	2
Sentence unscramble	2
Word unscramble	2
Poem	1
Postcard	1